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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [IZ](#)  
SUBJECT: PUK INTERNAL SQUABBLING AND THE KRG ELECTIONS

REF: BAGHDAD 514

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Robert S. Ford for reasons  
1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary. While we monitor Arab-Kurd tensions, the control-oriented Kurdish political leadership is traversing serious political turbulence. Protracted Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) internal power negotiations with Nawshirwan Mustafa have Kurdish leaders insisting on a closed candidate list for the upcoming Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) elections. Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) leaders refuse to allow Nawshirwan to run a candidate list separate from PUK because it would disrupt the KDP-PUK balance of parliamentary seats. KDP leaders insist that the PUK-KDP accord remain intact, recognizing that an imbalance of seats could re-open old animosities which in turn could damage the Kurdish alliance and weaken its ability to deal with Prime Minister Maliki and the central government. Although Kurdish leaders can expect to face criticism from the Embassy and international community for having an undemocratic closed list election, they feel they have much more at stake if the Kurdish alliance implodes. End Summary.

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PUK INTERNAL WOES  
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¶2. (C) On March 7, immediately following Iran's Expediency Council Chairman Akbar Hashemi Rasfanzani's visit, President Jalal Talabani returned to Sulemaniyah to continue negotiations with disgruntled members of his Patriotic Union Party's (PUK) leadership. PUK Spokesperson Mala Bakhtiar told PolOff that the first agenda topic was a revision of PUK politburo affairs followed by upcoming Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) elections. He then reiterated Talabani's reform plan to pledge PUK non-interference in governmental affairs and the need to settle Nawshirwan Mustafa's position within PUK. Even though Nawshirwan Mustafa's reform group resigned last week, Nawshirwan abandoned his flock to cut a deal for himself with Talabani (reftel). On March 8, Talabani's Advisor Aram Yarwessi told PolOff that the negotiations were still ongoing.

¶3. (C) At a March 6 luncheon hosted by Kirkuk Provincial Chairman PUK Rizgar Ali, a member of Nawshirwan's reform group (who resigned from the PUK politburo) Jalal Jawhar refused to discuss Nawshirwan's recent decision to negotiate his own deal. Instead, Jawhar demonstrated how disgruntled he was with Talabani by accusing him and DPM Barham Salih of doing nothing for the Kurdish people. He went so far as to insist that Talabani's authoritarian ways were equal to Saddam's. Prominent PUK member Azad Ali added that Talabani weakened the PUK in the face of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). Ali claimed that nothing (inside the PUK) is democratic or transparent and that PUK is losing its competition against the KDP. Jawhar had no faith that Talabani would broker a settlement on Kirkuk, push through an

oil law, or determine KRG's southern border. As such, he accused Talabani of being an "Iraqi" not Kurdish politician and dismissed the need for PUK to be in Baghdad representing Kurdish interests. He stated that fighting Maliki does not enter into the Kurdish equation because the lower 15 governorates do not matter to any Kurd.

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FROM THE OUTSIDE LOOKING IN  
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¶4. (C) On March 4, KDP Intelligence Director Masrur Barzani told Special Advisor for Northern Iraq (S/A) Krajewski that PUK internal squabbles are not about reform but about power and the KRG premiership. Unlike KDP's family legacy, Barzani described PUK as an "umbrella group" for different "personalities." Barzani said that Nawshirwan was a smart, persuasive manipulator who was totally unreliable and lacked a power base outside Sulemaniyah. In contrast, PUK Deputy General Secretary and KRG Vice President Kosrat Rasoul Ali was ill (epilepsy and/or Parkinsons), "one with the people" but not "politically intellectual." Barzani lauded DPM Barham Salih as the "big picture guy, good for Talabani, good for Baghdad politics and good with the KDP though lacking ties to the Sulemaniyah old guard." Barzani would not venture who would become the next KRG PM but KDP Politburo Head Fadil Merani said, "In an end-all game, the KDP will unequivocally support Talabani's decision."

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UNITED WE STAND, DIVIDED WE FAIL  
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¶5. (C) Even though KRG had not yet decided to go with open lists, Merani explained that Nawshirwan's ploy to run his own list for the elections was the impetus for KDP and PUK to insist on a closed-list election. He added that the KDP recognizes Nawshirwan as part of PUK when it comes to the Kurdish National Assembly (KNA) seats. If Nawshirwan wants to run his own list, any seats he wins must be a subset of PUK's. KRG Minister of Interior KDP Karim Sinjari added that KDP cannot risk any fissures between the PUK and KDP. Masrur Barzani reasoned that if PUK, KDP and Nawshirwan ran separate lists, one party would invariably do better than the others. He said, "We would all start pointing fingers" and warned that, "Kurds don't point fingers, we point guns." He reminded us that only 10 years prior the KDP and PUK were at war with each other. Even though a PUK-KDP accord is in place, wounds lay open beneath the surface. Barzani was clear that they cannot afford to be fighting each other because the Kurds must remain a united front in the fight against Prime Minister Maliki and the central government.

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COMMENT  
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¶6. (C) Judging by some of the comments made by current and former PUK members, Talabani has his hands full with Kurdish region-focussed players who are focused on Kurdistan to the exclusion of Iraqi national politics. The idea that an open list could lead to renewed KDP-PUK fighting should not be readily or casually dismissed. Most of our interlocutors, and the great majority of Kurd leaders vividly recall the vicious PUK-KDP war in the mid 90's. The accord to end that fighting was very carefully calibrated with USG assistance. Both sides are loathe to upset the balance, especially with the PUK in turmoil.

¶7. (C) That said, the U.S. should call the KRG election what it is: neither very open nor especially democratic. The Kurds are quite sensitive to this and will be unhappy, but we anticipate they will go with a combined closed list all the same. The risk outweighs the shame. We should be cognizant and even understanding of their dilemma, but we don't have to approve of their election process. We should be blunt in private, and a bit more circumspect in public.

